

SS. Sergius & Herman of Valaam  
Russian Orthodox Chapel  
Monk's Lagoon  
Spruce Island  
Alaska ↗ Kodiak Islands

HABS No. AK-52

HABS  
AK  
12-MOLA,  
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

ADDENDUM  
FOLLOWS...

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SS. SERGIUS AND HERMAN OF VALAAM  
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHAPEL

HABS No. AK-52

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AK  
12-MOLA,  
1-

- Location: Approximately .5 miles from shore, Monk's Lagoon, Spruce Island, near Kodiak Island, Alaska.
- Present Owner: Alaska Diocese, Orthodox Church in America.
- Present Occupant: None.
- Present Use: As a chapel; although there is no congregation that worships here, it is used for holy days and other events.
- Significance: A number of historic Russian Orthodox churches survive in Alaska, built by Native congregations in traditional forms. This chapel was built to commemorate 100 years of Russian Orthodoxy in Alaska. The hip-roofed, almost square nave has a distinctive form, with pleasing proportions.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1895-1896. On July 10, 1895, the Dean of the Sitka District wrote to Bishop Nicholas:

Because of the absence of the General Agent of the Alaska Commercial Company, Mr. Washburn, I could not finish arrangements for building a chapel on Spruce Island. I found only the plans and drawings made by Mr. Demidov and estimated that the chapel will cost at least \$650. The clergy of the Kodiak Church promised to speak to Mr. Washburn about the delivery of the materials necessary for building, and with the next mail they will present the matter in detail for your decision.<sup>1</sup>

M. L. Washburn, agent of the Alaska Commercial Company, gave an estimate for materials and labor in August 1895.<sup>2</sup> The chapel was apparently completed by July 24, 1896, when this report was made:

First, we spied the white outlines of the monument among the trees. . . .  
Between these two tombs rises a wooden monument recently built in

<sup>1</sup> Priest Vldadmir Donskoi to Bishop Nicholas, July 10, 1895, Documents Relative to the History of Alaska 2:180.

<sup>2</sup> Alaska Russian Church Archives, reel 181. Portions are cited below in "3. Original plans and construction."

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commemoration of the 100th year of the existence of Orthodoxy in America. This monument is built in the shape of a chapel. The top of it is built as a receptacle for the icon and lampad which is kept burning continually by the devout couple Ruppia, who come here on Sundays to pray.<sup>3</sup>

2. Architect: The designer was Timofa Demedoff, according to the Dean's letter of July 10, 1895.
3. Builder: Alaska Commercial Company.
4. Original plans and construction: The chapel -- named in honor of the founders of the Valaam Monastery, whence came the first Russian Orthodox missionaries to Alaska -- was built to honor the centennial of Orthodoxy in Alaska. When first constructed, the chapel was between the tombs of Father Herman and Hieromonk Ioasaph, not over them, as it is now.

The 1895 agreement with the Alaska Commercial Company listed the materials and indicated that Timofa Demedoff had developed plans:

logs, poles and labor putting up log frame and completing the church per plans rendered estimate per Timofa Demedoff . . . \$350

Material

2,800 ft. Oregon pine 1 x 12 . . . \$84  
1,200 ft. Oregon pine 1 x 4 t & g . . . 48  
15 M shingles . . . 45  
200 ft. siding . . . 7  
250# asstd nails . . . 12.50  
10 sheets galvanized iron . . . 12.50  
120 yds. Cabot A. Cotton . . . 12  
75# white lead . . . 7.50  
10# Fancy Paints asstd colors . . . 5  
5 gals paint oil . . . 5  
5 pr. 8 x 10 window sash . . . 7.50  
3 doors 2-6 x 6-6 x 1-1/2 . . . 9  
50 ft. plain gilt moulding . . . 12.50  
door locks and sundries . . . 32.50

[Total] . . . \$650<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "Unofficial report of conditions of churches and schools in the parishes of the Sitka Superintendency during the Dean's inspection in the summer of 1896," Documents Relative to the History of Alaska, 1:180.

<sup>4</sup> Alaskan Russian Church Archives, reel 181.

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The first item probably referred to timber hewn on site, and included the log structure, and floor and roofing members. The 2,800' of planks probably sided the building's exterior and constituted the roofing material, to be topped with the shingles or the galvanized iron. The 1,200' of tongue-and-groove lumber was just enough to cover the floor of the nave (i.e., 400 sq. ft.). Interior finishes included cotton for the walls. The 50' of gilt molding apparently framed the icons. The Alaska Commercial Co. did not charge for delivery and also promised to donate \$50 of the total to the church.

5. Alterations and additions: In 1935, Fr. Gerasim moved to Spruce Island to devote his life to the memory of Father Herman. He undertook extensive renovations of the chapel -- probably with the assistance of the villagers from Ouzinkie -- and may have been responsible for moving the graves under the chapel. The vestibule, sided in a different material than the nave and sanctuary, is probably an addition, perhaps later than Fr. Gerasim's work.

B. Historical Context:

Father Herman, who was canonized as America's first saint of the Orthodox Church in 1970, was one of the ten original missionaries who came to Kodiak in 1794. Meeting stiff resistance from Alexander Baranov, the manager in Kodiak, the missionaries were rendered largely ineffective. Father Herman defied the authorities, however, establishing an orphanage for Aleuts on Spruce Island. Sometime after 1808, he moved permanently to Spruce Island. By 1823, Herman was the only survivor of the original mission. He died in 1837 at Spruce Island.<sup>5</sup> The population in the early 1880s consisted of 78 creoles (part Russian, part native).<sup>6</sup>

A chapel dedicated to the Meeting of the Lord was built by the Russian-American Company here in 1857. In 1895 it was described as being "in ruins."<sup>7</sup>

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The squareness of the nave is emphasized by the wood-shingled hip roof; the hip roof of the sanctuary and the gable roof of the vestibule echo the pitch of the main hip roof, giving the church a pleasing composition.

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<sup>5</sup> R. M. A., "Saint Herman of Alaska: A Biographical Sketch," Orthodox Alaska 7 (July 1978): 4-8.

<sup>6</sup> Ivan Petroff, Report on the Population, Industries, and Resources of Alaska (Washington: GPO, 1884), 28.

<sup>7</sup> "Concerning the Russian Orthodox Mission in America," trans. Sister Victoria, Orthodox America 6 (January 1977): 40.

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2. Condition of fabric: good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The overall dimensions are 19'-7" x 40'-4". The nave measures 19'-7" x 21'-6".
2. Foundations: Post, enclosed at the perimeter with vertical boards.
3. Walls: The walls of the nave and sanctuary are clad with clapboards and cornerboards. The vestibule is covered with novelty siding. The whole is painted white with aqua trim.
4. Structural system, framing: The structure is presumed to be log, as indicated by the 11" thickness of the walls. Access to the walls was not possible.
5. Porches: There is a wooden stairway and stoop, with a partial railing.
6. Chimneys: none.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance is a single door, with five rectangular panels, set in a plain board surround.
  - b. Windows: Most of the windows have six-over-six-light double-hung sash; they are set in plain surrounds with a small projection at the top of the lintel. There is one six-light window in the vestibule and one in the basement.
8. Roof:
  - a. Shape, covering: There is a hip roof over the nave. The sanctuary has a hip roof, whose ridge runs into the nave roof. There is a gable roof over the vestibule. All are covered with wood shingles.
  - b. Cornice, eaves: The cornice is boxed, and the eaves extend approximately 8".
  - c. Cupola: The hip roof over the nave culminates in a pyramid form which supports a small onion dome and a cross above.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Each element of the building -- the vestibule, nave, and sanctuary -- is an open space. In the nave, the amvon is raised one step. There are two grave

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sites in the basement, although the body of Fr. Herman was removed to Kodiak in 1970. The other is presumably Hieromonk Ioasaph.

2. Stairways: None.
3. Flooring: Tongue-and-groove boards.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are horizontal beaded boards, painted light blue; the ceiling is tongue-and-groove boards, painted gray. The ceiling of the sanctuary is beaded boards. The walls and ceiling of the vestibule have some plyboard.
5. Doorways and doors: There is one four-panel door between the vestibule and the nave; it has plain board surrounds.
6. Decorative features: The iconostas is fairly plain, with some molding. Fixed doors are used as part of the screen, with icons in the top half and vertical beaded boards in the bottom half.
7. Mechanical equipment: None -- no heat, electricity, or water.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The front of the church faces north. Located in a sylvan setting, the church is reached by an approximately .5 mile hike through a forest on spruce needle paths.
2. Outbuildings: About 100 yards closer to the water, there is a small settlement, including Fr. Gerasim's chapel (HABS No. AK-52-A), Fr. Gerasim's cell (HABS No. AK-52-B), an outhouse, and a recently constructed well house (HABS No. AK-52-C). This pyramid-roofed, asphalt-shingled structure shelters a spring from which holy water is obtained.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

R. M. A. "Saint Herman of Alaska: A Biographical Sketch." Orthodox Alaska 7 (July 1978): 4-8.

Alaskan Russian Church Archives, reel 181 (Kodiak-Spruce Island), Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

"Concerning the Orthodox Mission in America," October 14, 1895, trans. Sister Victoria, Orthodox Alaska 6 (January 1977): 36-46.

Documents Relative to the History of Alaska. Microfilm of typescript translation of Russian-language and other documents, including excerpts from the Alaska Church collection in volumes 1

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and 2.

Petroff, Ivan. Report on the Population, Industries, and Resources of Alaska. Washington: GPO, 1884.

Rose, Fr. Seraphim. "Father Gerasim: Guardian of St. Herman of Alaska." Platina, Ca.: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1983.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of SS. Sergius and Herman of Valaam Russian Orthodox Chapel was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), a division of the National Park Service, the state of Alaska and the Icon Preservation Task Force. The project was executed under the general direction of Robert J. Kapsch, chief of HABS/HAER, and Boyd Evison, Alaska Regional Director, National Park Service. Recording was carried out during summer 1989 by Steven M. Peterson, project director; Jean Swearingen, curator; John Lowe III, photographer; and Alison K. Hoagland, historian, who prepared this report.

ADDENDUM TO

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Interior

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